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Canada 

Wild blueberry grower takes novel approach to expansion



Willie Bevan, centre, with daughter Ella and wife Amy, credits the PEI Perennial Crop Development Program under the federal-provincial Canadian Agricultural Partnership for helping him expand his wild blueberry farm into processing and value-added exports. Photo by Crystal Fullerton.

PEI's wild blueberries are fantastic, but first-time novelist and blueberry farmer Willie Bevan is giving new meaning to the word.

In his children's book *Mother Nature's Plan*, the blueberry fields of Ella's Forest Organics are home to dragons, elves and gnomes.

"It's something that I've been writing during the winter months," says Bevan. "It's just been kind of cool to take the stories I used to tell my daughter Ella when she was young and turn them into a book."

The plot and characters of the book may be fantasy, but the real-life story of Ella's Forest Organics, named after Bevan's daughter, has its own stranger-than-fiction moments.

In fact, Bevan, who grew up on a beef farm in PEI, admits he wasn't even thinking about blueberries when he and his wife bought their first piece of land near Fort Augustus a dozen years ago.

"I was working in Ohio, Alberta and Ontario with my own survey company, and my wife and I were looking for some land that was close to my parents and where we could make our own walking trails through the woods," he says. "After we bought, people said that the land looked

really great to grow blueberries on, so we thought maybe we could give it a try."

They could, and then some.

This year, Ella's Forest Organics harvested 60 acres of wild blueberries, most of them grown organically. Up to 40 per cent of the berries will be made into dehydrated blueberry products and tea that is sold not only in Canada but also in Australia, Taiwan and China.

"It's been a learning curve, especially because we had decided right from the beginning that we wanted to grow them organically, and I still may not be doing it right," Bevan says.

"But I'm learning."

He credits PEI's Perennial Crop Development Program under the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership for helping him make the move towards full-scale commercial production four years ago.

The program partially off-set the cost of a 10-foot by 30-foot freezer that allowed him to market his berries year-round, as well as a dehydrator that created opportunities for value-added products.

"The program was a game changer," he says. "It helped us get everything we needed in one shop to really grow our business.

"The dehydrator is the hub of our value-added production, and it runs all day and night during the winter."

This winter, Bevan will thaw and dehydrate about 30,000 pounds of blueberries to produce 3,000 pounds of blueberry Powder. Some of the powder is packaged under the Ella's Forest Organics label as a product called Wowder.

The dehydrated blueberry powder is marketed in 250-gram bags as a healthy antioxidant that can be added to smoothies, yogurt and ice cream, homemade baking and cooking, or sprinkled on cereal.

"It has a natural sweetness," says Bevan. "My mom likes to sprinkle it on her porridge as a replacement for brown sugar."

While on-line sales of Wowder were strong, Bevan says advertising was expensive and it was difficult to find the time to package so many small orders.

While trying to figure that out, he was contacted through Instagram and Facebook by companies in Australia and Taiwan that were interested in buying the powder in bulk and selling it under their own labels and deals were signed.

A broker in Ontario also reached out and a contract was signed that allows the broker to ship the powder to a number of Chinese stores.

Last year, the company introduced Bow Wowder, a dehydrated mix of blueberries and cranberries that can be added to pet food. While initially sold locally through a pet store, they now have a distributor in Ontario.

"Bow Wowder is really starting to take off," he says.

Ella's Forest Organics still sells its own products on-line, including a blueberry tea made from the autumn red leaves of blueberry plants and is also available in black and green tea versions, but Bevan says the bulk sales are making it easier to expand.

"These arrangements are great for us because it gives me more time to focus on growing the production end of the business," he says. "Instead of filling a lot of small retail orders every day of the week, I can do large commercial orders once a week."

The farm currently has about 400 acres around Fort Augustus, and he is looking to add more land through purchases and leases.

"My goal is to eventually produce a million pounds of wild blueberries annually," says Bevan half-jokingly, who is a director with the PEI Wild Blueberry Growers Association.

"It's a lofty goal, but a lot of people are leasing land to us now because they like the idea of their property being farmed as natural as possible.

As for the inspiration for the company name, Bevan admits his daughter Ella is no longer the young girl who is pictured picking blueberries on the company's packaging.

"She's 15 now," he says. "She kind of likes it but she gets a bit embarrassed by it, too, because she says she doesn't look like that anymore."

Ella makes an appearance in Bevan's novel and he says that his fictional blueberry world, like his own business world, will continue to grow.

"I've already got part of the next book written," he says with a smile.



Willie Bevan will dehydrate 30,000 pounds of wild blueberries this year to make 3,000 pounds of blueberry powder for local and export markets. He says the dehydrator and the walk-in freezer he purchased with assistance from PEI's Perennial Crop Development Program under the federal-provincial Canadian Agricultural Partnership has been a "game changer" for his operation. Photo by Crystal Fullerton.